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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED

THE LEATHERWOOD GOD. By WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS. New York: The Century Company, 1916.

Mr. Howells is commonly, and no doubt rightly, regarded as among the most genial of American authors, as well as among the most intellectual. Yet in Mr. Howells's novels there has appeared at times a vein of skepticism that was almost bitter, a quality, no doubt, that the thoughtful writer cannot avoid and should not try to avoid.

The two ultimate literary elements are life and death; literary thought associates itself with one or the other. Now Mr. Howells has made a part of our literary consciousness the sense of our limitations, our bewilderments, our painful dubieties, our secret conviction that after all "we don't know much about it"; our feeling that we are futile except when we are simply kind. All this region of experience, which we are for the most part too romantic to think much about, Mr. Howells has humanized and made into literature of the finest.

Dubiety and the sense of our limitations, however, are in themselves painful; they are of death rather than of life. Mr. Howells's geniality, his "will to live" has always risen above any depressing effect that might result from rather a ruthless anatomizing of life; yet it has sometimes seemed that he left his reader (beneficially, no doubt, but distressingly) weighed down with a sense of being very much too human. One does not feel it a disgrace to be "all too human" in Mr. Howells's sense: on the contrary one feels it to be highly honorable. Yet it has seemed a little unsatisfactory, too.

In *The Leatherwood God*, the "too human" element is more strongly emphasized than in any other one of Mr. Howells's tales, and yet this story is stimulating and not at all depressing. It is as simple and powerful as if Mark Twain had written it, and at the same time it shows a characteristic vein of tenderness which is unlike the tenderness of Mark Twain, and which is, one is tempted to say, a finer product.

The story is a complete episode taken from life. Its general outlines are determined by the facts and its unity is largely the unity of the facts. It is fortunate, perhaps, that Mr. Howells could in this

case permit himself the effective use of a plot. But it is not to the ready-made plot nor to the natural dramatic unity of the theme that the story owes its strength. It is a theme with which it would be easy to fail completely. A religious impostor declares himself to be God and induces a large number of respectable people in the little Ohio community of Leatherwood to worship him. The man himself, though in a measure self-deceived, is by no means insane—he hasn't even the dignity of complete self-delusion. Still less is he of the stuff of which martyrs are made: on the contrary this man who pretended to be God—his real name was Dylks—is a great coward. One would suppose then that the story would simply be a picture of human degradation. But Mr. Howells rises above the absurdities, the vulgarities that are inherent in his theme. The grandiosity that associates itself with the large pretensions of Dylks gives occasion for humor almost Rabelaisian in bigness, though skilfully kept within the bounds of taste. The irony of the story is masterly; it somehow exalts rather than belittles human nature, while it shows how near the heart the greatest folly really lies. One sympathizes with the deluded worshippers and one's feeling is unalloyed with a trace of condescension. These hearty muscular men and hard-working natural-minded women—too healthy to be morbid, too impulsive and at the same time too conscientious to be merely absurd—one is not ashamed to acknowledge as kin.

The Leatherwood God is in its way a triumph. Perhaps Mr. Howells has never written a more vital story.

MR. BRITLING SEES IT THROUGH. By H. G. WELLS. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916.

Mr. Wells has written a novel about the war that is infinitely the better as a war book because it begins by being a very personal sort of story and maintains the personal point of view throughout. *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* is a triumph for Mr. Wells's method as a novelist, a vindication of his way of looking at things. When one lays down the book one realizes quite clearly that man is a rather absurd and self-deluded creature; that the mind of the average man is a mass of contradictions; that a gaily domestic and philosophic kind of life does not by any means render one safe from the most fearful shocks; that the things we live by are for the most part not realities at all. The realities themselves we are afraid of, and we do not know how to grasp them. "That which is far off and exceeding deep, who shall find it out?" Yet the book really does give one courage, and it actually makes one glad to be a man and to be alive in the year 1916. Most remarkable of all, the story is amusing, and if it gradually ceases to be merry and becomes intensely grave, one does not feel that the change of mood involves a jarring reversal